

August 13, 2004

**JUDITH-VALLEY-PHILLIPS OIL AND GAS SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT (RMP/EIS)**

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

In response to a protest received on the final Judith-Valley-Phillips RMP/EIS, the BLM is preparing an Oil and Gas Supplemental RMP/EIS to evaluate the need to avoid leasing in areas with valuable wildlife habitat. The supplemental RMP/EIS, along with the final RMP/EIS, will be the basis for a record of decision (ROD) to lease with appropriate stipulations to protect resources, or not to lease because of sensitive resources which cannot be protected with stipulations. The BLM is currently preparing a biological assessment for threatened and endangered species and expects to issue the final Supplemental RMP/EIS in 2005.

ISSUES:

The BLM is responsible for oil and gas leasing on BLM-administered subsurface in northcentral Montana in Fergus, Petroleum, Judith Basin, Phillips, and Valley counties and the southern portion of Chouteau County. The BLM expects continued interest in oil and gas exploration and development.

In September 1988, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) protested the BLM's issuance of oil and gas leases in Montana claiming an inadequate analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act and non-compliance with the Endangered Species Act. The BLM's November 1988 decision on this protest was that BLM would suspend lease issuance on tracts with special wildlife stipulations until a new RMP/EIS was completed meeting the Bureau's supplemental program guidance.

In September 1988, the BLM issued a notice of intent to prepare an RMP/EIS for public lands in northcentral Montana. One of the issues identified for the RMP was oil and gas leasing. The draft RMP/EIS was released for public comment in July 1991. The NWF raised the concern that the November 1988 decision was not mentioned, much less identified as a practical alternative. The BLM's response to this comment was that areas nominated for lease which would require special stipulations to protect wildlife would not be offered for lease, but this was an interim policy until the RMP/EIS was completed and not an alternative.

In December 1992 the BLM released the final RMP/EIS, which evaluated the types of stipulations needed on oil and gas leases to protect other resources, for a 30-day protest period. In January 1993, the NWF protested the final RMP/EIS because the document neither mentioned the 1988 decision nor identified an alternative of carrying the temporary arrangement forward to avoid leasing valuable wildlife habitat. After careful review of this issue, the state director decided that the protest warranted a supplement to the final RMP/EIS addressing an alternative for oil and gas leasing that would avoid leasing valuable wildlife habitat.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The supplemental RMP/EIS addresses two additional alternatives for oil and gas leasing on 3.1 million acres in northcentral Montana. One alternative would avoid oil and gas leasing in areas with valuable wildlife habitat. The other alternative would provide for oil and gas leasing while protecting other resource values through stipulations or closing areas where resource values are not compatible with exploration and development.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

In April 1998, the BLM mailed the draft Oil and Gas Supplemental RMP/EIS to approximately 500 agencies, organizations, and individuals for a 90-day public comment period. The BLM received 10 comment letters.

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